



Syria

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2002](#)

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Syria is a republic under a military regime with virtually absolute authority in the hands of the President. Despite the existence of some institutions of democratic government, the President, with counsel from his ministers, high-ranking members of the ruling Ba'th Party, and a relatively small circle of security advisers, makes key decisions regarding foreign policy, national security, internal politics, and the economy. All three branches of government are influenced to varying degrees by leaders of the Ba'th Party, whose primacy in state institutions and the Parliament is mandated by the Constitution. The Parliament may not initiate laws but only assesses and at times modifies those proposed by the executive branch. The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but security courts are subject to political influence. The regular courts generally display independence, although political connections and bribery may influence verdicts.

The powerful role of the security services in government, which extends beyond strictly security matters, stems in part from the state of emergency that has been in place almost continuously since 1963. The Government justifies martial law because of the state of war with Israel and past threats from terrorist groups. Syrian Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence are military agencies, while General Security, State Security, and Political Security come under the purview of the Ministry of Interior. The branches of the security services operated independently of each other and outside the legal system. The security forces were under effective government control. Their members committed serious human rights abuses.

The population of the country was approximately 17 million. The economy was based on commerce, agriculture, oil production, and government services. Economic growth was hampered by the still dominant state role in the economy, a complex bureaucracy, overarching security concerns, endemic corruption, currency restrictions, a lack of modern financial services and communications, and a weak legal system.

The Government's human rights record remained poor, and it continued to commit serious abuses. Citizens did not have the right to change their government. The Government used its vast powers to prevent any organized political opposition, and there have been very few antigovernment manifestations. Continuing serious abuses included the use of torture in detention; poor prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; prolonged detention without trial; fundamentally unfair trials in the security courts; an inefficient judiciary that suffered from corruption and, at times, political influence; and infringement on privacy rights. The Government significantly restricted freedom of speech and of the press. Freedom of assembly does not exist under the law and the Government restricted freedom of association. The Government did not officially allow independent domestic human rights groups to exist; however, it permitted periodic meetings of unlicensed civil society forums throughout the year. The Government placed some limits on freedom of religion and freedom of movement. Proselytizing by groups it considered Zionist was not tolerated, and proselytizing in general was not encouraged. Violence and societal discrimination against women were problems. The Government discriminated against the stateless Kurdish minority, suppressed worker rights, and tolerated child labor in some instances.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports of political killings or other killings committed by government forces during the year.

In November 2000, a number of armed clashes occurred between Bedouin shepherds and Druze residents of Suwayda Province that required government military intervention to stop. Local press reported that between 15 and 20 Druze, Bedouin, and security forces personnel were killed (see Section 5). Some members of the security forces committed a number of serious

human rights abuses. In its Annual Report, the Syrian Human Rights Commission stated that in 2001 and during the year three individuals died in detention (see Section 1.c.). The Government has not investigated previous deaths in detention.

b. Disappearance

There were no new confirmed reports of politically motivated disappearances during the year. Because security forces often did not provide detainees' families with information regarding their welfare or location, many persons who disappeared in past years are believed to be in long-term detention or to have died in detention. The number of new disappearances has declined in recent years, although this may be due to the Government's success in deterring opposition political activity rather than a loosening of the criteria for detention (see Section 1.d.).

Despite inquiries by international human rights organizations and foreign governments, the Government offered little new information on the welfare and whereabouts of persons who have been held incommunicado for years or about whom little is known other than the approximate date of their detention. The Government claimed that it has released all Palestinians and Jordanian and Lebanese citizens who reportedly were abducted from Lebanon during and after Lebanon's civil war. However, the Government's claim was disputed by Lebanese nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Amnesty International (AI), and other international NGOs, as well as some family members of those who allegedly remain in the country's prisons (see Section 1.d.).

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Despite the existence of constitutional provisions and several Penal Code penalties for abusers, there was credible evidence that security forces continued to use torture, although to a lesser extent than in previous years. Former prisoners, detainees, and the London-based Syrian Human Rights Organization reported that torture methods included administering electrical shocks; pulling out fingernails; forcing objects into the rectum; beating, sometimes while the victim is suspended from the ceiling; hyperextending the spine; bending the detainees into the frame of a wheel and whipping exposed body parts; and using a chair that bends backwards to asphyxiate the victim or fracture the victim's spine. In 2001 AI published a report claiming that authorities at Tadmur Prison regularly tortured prisoners, or forced prisoners to torture each other. Although it occurs in prisons, torture was most likely to occur while detainees were being held at one of the many detention centers run by the various security services throughout the country, especially while the authorities were attempting to extract a confession or information.

The Government has denied that it uses torture and claims that it would prosecute anyone believed guilty of using excessive force or physical abuse. Past victims of torture have identified the officials who tortured them, up to the level of brigadier general. If allegations of excessive force or physical abuse are to be made in court, the plaintiff is required to initiate his own civil suit against the alleged abuser. Courts did not order medical examinations for defendants who claimed that they were tortured (see Section 1.e.). There were no substantiated allegations of torture during the year.

In 2000 the Government apprehended Raed Hijazi, accused of a terrorist plot targeting American and Israeli tourists in Jordan during the millennium celebrations, and sent him to Jordan to stand trial. According to media accounts of the trial, doctors for both the defense and the prosecution testified that Hijazi's body showed signs of having been beaten, but witnesses, including Hijazi, made contradictory and inconclusive claims regarding whether the alleged abuse occurred while he was in Jordanian or Syrian custody. The Jordanian court has rejected the allegations that Hijazi's confession was coerced. In February the Jordanian authorities sentenced Hijazi to death. He has appealed the decision but remained in custody at year's end pending a decision.

Prison conditions generally were poor and did not meet international standards for health and sanitation. However, there were separate facilities for men, women, and children. Pre-trial detainees, particularly those held for political or security reasons, were usually held separately from convicted prisoners. Facilities for political or national security prisoners generally were worse than those for common criminals.

At some prisons, authorities allowed visitation, but in other prisons, security officials demanded bribes from family members who wished to visit incarcerated relatives. Overcrowding and the denial of food occurred at several prisons. According to Human Rights Watch, prisoners and detainees were held without adequate medical care, and some prisoners with significant health problems reportedly were denied medical treatment. Some former detainees have reported that the Government prohibited reading materials, even the Koran, for political prisoners.

In 2001 the London-based Syrian Human Rights Commission reported that three detainees died in prison and that their remains bore evidence of torture and extreme medical neglect.

The Government did not permit independent monitoring of prison or detention center conditions, although diplomatic or consular officials were granted access in high profile cases.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

Arbitrary arrest and detention were significant problems. The Emergency Law, which authorizes the Government to conduct

preventive arrests, overrides Penal Code provisions against arbitrary arrest and detention, including the need to obtain warrants. Officials contend that the Emergency Law is applied only in narrowly defined cases, and in January 2001, the regional press reported that the Information Minister claimed that the authorities had frozen "martial law." Nonetheless, in cases involving political or national security offenses, arrests often were carried out in secret. Suspects may be detained incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge or trial and are denied the right to a judicial determination regarding the pretrial detention. Some of these practices were prohibited by the state of emergency, but the authorities were not held to these strictures. Additionally, those suspected of political or national security offenses may be arrested and prosecuted under ambiguous and broad articles of the Penal Code, and subsequently tried in either the criminal or security courts, as occurred with the 10 civil society activists arrested in August and September 2001. During the year, two were tried and sentenced in criminal court and eight were tried and sentenced in secrecy in the Supreme State Security Court under the Emergency Law's authority. All were initially held incommunicado and in solitary confinement, though the criminal court trials and initial sessions of one of the other trials were open to the press and diplomats.

The Government detained relatives of detainees or of fugitives in order to obtain confessions or the fugitive's surrender (see Section 1.f.). The Government also threatened families or friends of detainees, at times with the threat of expulsion, to ensure their silence, to force them to disavow publicly their relatives, or to force detainees into compliance.

Defendants in civil and criminal trials had the right to bail hearings and the possible release from detention on their own recognizance. Bail was not allowed for those accused of state security offenses. Unlike defendants in regular criminal and civil cases, security detainees did not have access to lawyers prior to or during questioning.

Detainees had no legal redress for false arrest. Security forces often did not provide detainees' families with information regarding their welfare or location while in detention. Consequently many persons who have disappeared in past years are believed to be in long-term detention without charge or possibly to have died in detention (see Section 1.b.). Many detainees brought to trial have been held incommunicado for years, and their trials often have been unfair (see Section 1.e.). In the past, there were reliable reports that the Government did not notify foreign governments when their citizens were arrested or detained.

Pretrial detention may be lengthy, even in cases not involving political or national security offenses. The criminal justice system is backlogged. Many criminal suspects were held in pretrial detention for months and may have their trials extended for additional months. Lengthy pretrial detention and drawn-out court proceedings are caused by a shortage of available courts and the absence of legal provisions for a speedy trial or plea bargaining (see Section 1.e.).

In May 2001, the Government released prominent political prisoner Nizar Nayyuf, who had been imprisoned since 1992 for founding an unlawful organization, disseminating false information, and undermining the Government; he immediately was placed under house arrest. In June 2001, the Government allowed Nayyuf to leave the country for medical treatment. In September 2001, Nayyuf was summoned to appear before an investigating court to respond to a complaint against him filed by Ba'th party lawyers for "inciting confessionism, attempting to illegally change the Constitution, and publishing false reports abroad." Nayyuf had not returned by year's end. The NGO Reporters Without Borders (RSF) claimed that the Government harassed and intimidated members of Nayyuf's family following the issuance of the summons. The Government reportedly fired two members of his immediate family from their jobs. The municipality threatened to expel members of Nayyuf's family if they did not disavow publicly his statements (see Section 4).

In August 2001, the Government arrested independent Member of Parliament Ma'mun Humsi during his hunger strike protesting official corruption, the excessive powers of the security forces, and the continuation of the Emergency Law. In a departure from previous practice, the Interior Ministry issued a statement justifying Humsi's arrest under Penal Code articles dealing with crimes against state security (see Section 3). In September 2001, the Government detained independent Member of Parliament Riad Seif shortly after Seif reactivated his unlicensed political discussion forum. The principal charge against both individuals was attempting to illegally change the Constitution (see Section 3). In March and April, Humsi and Seif were convicted in criminal court of attempting to change the Constitution illegally and each sentenced to 5 years in prison (see Section 1.e.).

In September 2001, the Government detained prominent political activist and longtime detainee Riad al-Turk for violations of Penal Code articles dealing with crimes against state security, after al-Turk made derogatory public comments about late President Hafiz al-Asad. In June Al-Turk was convicted in closed Supreme State Security Court of attempting to change the Constitution illegally and sentenced to 30 months in prison (see Section 1.e.). On November 16, President Asad ordered Al-Turk released on humanitarian grounds.

In September 2001, the Government detained seven additional prominent human rights activists who had issued statements in support of Humsi, Seif, and al-Turk. The Government reportedly charged the seven activists under Penal Code articles dealing with crimes against state security (see Section 2.a.). Although all of the 10 civil society activists were arrested for Penal Code violations, only Humsi and Seif were tried in criminal court while all the others were tried in the Supreme State Security Court under the authority of the Emergency Law (see Section 1.e.).

At year's end, the leaders of the Turkomen who reportedly were detained without charge in 1996, remained in detention.

In 1999 and 2000, there were reports of arrests of hundreds of Syrian and Palestinian Islamists. Most of those arrested reportedly were released after signing an agreement not to participate in political activities; however, some may remain in

detention. At year's end, there were no new reports on those detained. There were no credible reports that the Government arrested Islamists on political charges during the year.

There were no reports of the arrests of minors on political charges during the year.

In January 2001, the Jordanian press reported the release from Syrian jails of six Jordanian prisoners of Palestinian origin, who had been imprisoned for membership in Palestinian organizations. Between May and July 2000, there were unconfirmed reports that a large number of Jordanian prisoners were released. However, according to AI, only three of the Jordanians released in 2000 had been held for political reasons.

In March 2001, Syrian intelligence officials in Lebanon arrested three Syrian Druze men who had converted to Christianity, possibly on suspicion of membership in Jehovah's Witnesses. The men were released after 2 months.

In July and August 2001, there were unconfirmed regional press reports that approximately 500 political detainees were moved from Tadmur Prison to Saydnaya Prison in preparation for the eventual closing of Tadmur. In 2000 the Government also closed the Mazzah prison, which reportedly held numerous prisoners and detainees. In August, AI reported the release of Communist Action Party member Haytham Na'al after 27 years in prison.

In 2000 the Government declared an amnesty for 600 political prisoners and detainees and a general pardon for some nonpolitical prisoners. The highly publicized amnesty was the first time the Government acknowledged detention of persons for political reasons. There were no credible reports of transfers of political prisoners during the year.

Most of those arrested during crackdowns in the 1980s, in response to violent attacks by the Muslim Brotherhood, have been released; however, some may remain in prolonged detention without charge. Some union and professional association officials detained in 1980 may remain in detention (see Sections 2.b. and 6.a.).

The number of remaining political detainees is unknown. In June 2000, prior to the November 2000 prison amnesty, Amnesty International estimated that there were approximately 1,500 political detainees; many of the detainees reportedly were suspected supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and the pro-Iraqi wing of the Ba'th party. There also were Jordanian, Lebanese, and Palestinian political detainees. Estimates of detainees are difficult to confirm because the Government does not verify publicly the number of detentions without charge, the release of detainees or amnestied prisoners, or whether detainees subsequently are sentenced to prison (see Section 1.e.).

Former prisoners were subject to a so-called "rights ban," which begins from the day of sentencing and lasts until 7 years after the expiration of the sentence, in the case of felony convictions. Persons subject to this ban are not allowed to vote, run for office, or work in the public sector; they often also are denied passports.

The Constitution prohibits exile; however, the Government has exiled citizens in the past. The Government refused to reissue the passports of citizens who fled the country in the 1980s; such citizens consequently are unable to return to the country.

There were no known instances of forced exile during the year.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but the two exceptional courts dealing with cases of alleged national security violations were not independent of executive branch control. The regular court system generally displayed considerable independence in civil cases, although political connections and bribery at times influenced verdicts.

The judicial system is composed of the civil and criminal courts, military courts, security courts, and religious courts, which adjudicate matters of personal status such as divorce and inheritance (see Section 5). The Court of Cassation is the highest court of appeal. The Supreme Constitutional Court is empowered to rule on the constitutionality of laws and decrees; it does not hear appeals.

Civil and criminal courts are organized under the Ministry of Justice. Defendants before these courts were entitled to the legal representation of their choice; the courts appoint lawyers for indigents. Defendants were presumed innocent; they are allowed to present evidence and to confront their accusers. Trials are public, except for those involving juveniles or sex offenses. Defendants may appeal their verdicts to a provincial appeals court and ultimately to the Court of Cassation. Such appeals are difficult to win because the courts do not provide verbatim transcripts of cases—only summaries prepared by the presiding judges. There are no juries.

Military courts have the authority to try civilians as well as military personnel. A military prosecutor decides the venue for a civilian defendant. There have been reports that the Government operates military field courts in locations outside established courtrooms. Such courts reportedly observed fewer of the formal procedures of regular military courts.

In September a military court charged lawyer and Chairman of the Syrian Human Rights Committee, Haytham al-Maleh, and three of his associates in absentia for spreading false news outside of the country, belonging to a political association of an international nature without government approval, and publishing material that causes sectarian friction.

The two security courts are the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), which tries political and national security cases, and the Economic Security Court (ESC), which tried cases involving financial crimes. Both courts operated under the state of emergency, not ordinary law, and did not observe constitutional provisions safeguarding defendants' rights.

Charges against defendants in the SSSC often were vague. Many defendants appeared to be tried for exercising normal political rights, such as free speech. For example, the Emergency Law authorizes the prosecution of anyone "opposing the goals of the revolution," "shaking the confidence of the masses in the aims of the revolution," or attempting to "change the economic or social structure of the State." Nonetheless, the Government contends that the SSSC tries only persons who have sought to use violence against the State.

Under SSSC procedures, defendants are not present during the preliminary or investigative phase of the trial, during which the prosecutor presents evidence. Trials usually were closed to the public. Lawyers were not ensured access to their clients before the trial and were excluded from the court during their client's initial interrogation by the prosecutor. Lawyers submitted written defense pleas rather than oral presentations. The State's case often was based on confessions, and defendants have not been allowed to argue in court that their confessions were coerced. There was no known instance in which the court ordered a medical examination for a defendant who claimed that he was tortured. The SSSC reportedly has acquitted some defendants, but the Government did not provide any statistics regarding the conviction rate. Defendants do not have the right to appeal verdicts, but sentences are reviewed by the Minister of Interior, who may ratify, nullify, or alter them. The President also may intervene in the review process.

Accurate information regarding the number of cases heard by the SSSC was difficult to obtain, although hundreds of cases were believed to pass through the court annually. Many reportedly involved charges relating to membership in various banned political groups, including the Party of Communist Action and the pro-Iraqi wing of the Ba'th Party. Sentences as long as 15 years have been imposed in the past. Since 1997 there have been no visits by human rights NGOs to attend sessions of the SSSC (see Section 4).

The 10 civil society activists arrested in August and September 2001 were tried in criminal and state security courts. In February independent Parliamentarians Mamun Humsi and Riyad Seif were tried in criminal court proceedings that were open, for the first time, to foreign observers and the press. Al noted that their parliamentary immunity was lifted without due attention to the procedures established by law. Humsi and Seif were denied confidential access to their lawyers throughout their detention and observers noted a number of procedural irregularities during the trials. In March and April, respectively, the Government sentenced Humsi and Seif to 5 years' imprisonment each for attempting to change the constitution illegally and inciting racial and sectarian strife.

During the year, the eight other civil society activists arrested in August and September 2001 were tried in secrecy by the Supreme State Security Court under authority of the Emergency Law. Only the first session of former political prisoner Riad al-Turk's trial was open to the media and international observers. Al-Turk was sentenced to 30 months for attempting to change the Constitution illegally but was released by presidential decree in November (see Section 1.d.). Lawyer and member of Seif and Humsi's defense team, Habib Issa, and physician and cofounder of the Syrian Human Rights Society, Walid al-Buni, were each sentenced to 5 years in prison for attempting to change the Constitution illegally. Economist and regime critic Arif Dalila was sentenced to up to 10 years for the same offense. Civil society activist Habib Saleh received a 3-year sentence for opposing the objectives of the revolution and inciting ethnic and sectarian strife. Hassan Sa'dun, physician and member of the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, Kamal al-Labwani, and engineer Fawaz Tillu were sentenced respectively to 2, 3, and 5 years in prison for instigating armed mutiny against the Government (see Sections 1.d., 2.a., and 3).

The ESC tried persons for alleged violations of foreign exchange laws and other economic crimes. The prosecution of economic crimes was not applied uniformly. Like the SSSC, the ESC did not ensure due process for defendants. Defendants were not provided adequate access to lawyers to prepare their defenses, and the State's case usually was based on confessions. High-ranking government officials may influence verdicts. Those convicted of the most serious economic crimes do not have the right of appeal, but those convicted of lesser crimes may appeal to the Court of Cassation. The Economic Penal Code allowed defendants in economic courts to be released on bail. The bail provision does not extend to those accused of forgery, counterfeiting, or auto theft; however, the amendment is intended to provide relief for those accused of other economic crimes, many of whom have been in pretrial detention for long periods of time. These amendments to the Economic Penal Code also limit the categories of cases that can be tried in the ESC. In November 2001, the Government approved a general pardon for nonpolitical prisoners and a reduction of sentences by one-third for persons convicted of economic crimes, with a provision to commute sentences entirely for persons who return embezzled funds to investors within 1 year of the law's effective date.

At least two persons arrested when late President Asad took power in 1970 may remain in prison, despite the expiration of one of the prisoners' sentences.

The Government in the past denied that it held political prisoners, arguing that although the aims of some prisoners may be political, their activities, including subversion, were criminal. The official media reported that the 600 beneficiaries of the November 2000 amnesty were political prisoners and detainees; this reportedly was the first time that the Government

acknowledged that it held persons for political reasons. Nonetheless, the Emergency Law and the Penal Code are so broad and vague, and the Government's power so sweeping, that many persons were convicted and are in prison for the mere expression of political opposition to the Government. The Government's sentencing of 10 prominent civil society and human rights activists for "crimes of state security" represented a retreat from recent modest attempts at political liberalization (see Sections 1.d. and 2.a.).

The exact number of political prisoners was unknown. Unconfirmed regional press reports estimated the total number of political prisoners at between 400 and 600. In April 2001, a domestic human rights organization estimated the number to be nearly 800, including approximately 130 belonging to the Islamic Liberation Party, 250 members and activists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, 150 members of the pro-Iraq wing of the Ba'th Party, and 14 Communists. In its report for the year, the Syrian Human Rights Committee estimated that there were approximately 4,000 political prisoners still in detention.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

Although laws prohibit such actions, the Emergency Law authorizes the security services to enter homes and conduct searches without warrants if security matters, very broadly defined, are involved. The security services selectively monitored telephone conversations and fax transmissions. The Government opened mail destined for both citizens and foreign residents. It also prevented the delivery of human rights materials (see Section 2.a.).

The Government continued its practice of threatening or detaining the relatives of detainees or of fugitives in order to obtain confessions, minimize outside interference, or prompt the fugitive's surrender (see Section 1.d.). There have been reports that security personnel force prisoners to watch relatives being tortured in order to extract confessions. According to AI, security forces also detained family members of suspected oppositionists (see Section 1.d.).

In the past, the Government and the Ba'th Party monitored and attempted to restrict some citizens' visits to foreign embassies and cultural centers.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Constitution provides for the right to express opinions freely in speech and in writing, but the Government restricted these rights significantly in practice. The Government strictly controlled the dissemination of information and permitted little written or oral criticism of President Asad, his family, the Ba'th Party, the military, or the legitimacy of the Government. The Government also did not permit sectarian issues to be raised. Detention and beatings for individual expressions of opinion that violate these unwritten rules at times occurred. The Government also threatened activists to attempt to control their behavior. In January 2001, novelist Nabil Sulayman was attacked outside his apartment in Latakia. Some observers believed the attack was a message from the Government to civil society advocates to moderate their pressure for reform. The attack came just after Information Minister Adnan 'Umran publicly criticized civil society advocates.

In a speech in February 2001, President Asad explicitly criticized civil society advocates as elites "from outside" who wrongly claim to speak for the majority and said that openness would only be tolerated as long as it "does not threaten the stability of the homeland or the course of development." The Government required all social, political, and cultural forums and clubs to obtain advance official approval for meetings, to obtain approval for lecturers and lecture topics, and to submit lists of all attendees (see Section 2.b.). During the year, several unapproved forums met, which while technically unhindered, were under government observation.

In January 2001, the regional press reported on a "Group of 1,000" intellectuals that issued a statement calling for more comprehensive reforms than those demanded by a group of 99 intellectuals in September 2000. The group's statement called for lifting martial law, ending the state of emergency that has been in effect since 1963, releasing political prisoners, and expanding civil liberties in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution. Although the Government did not take action immediately against any of the signatories, in September 2001 it detained seven prominent human rights figures, reportedly charging them under articles in the Penal Code dealing with crimes against state security. A number of those detained were signatories of the "Group of 1,000" petition. The Government tried the 10 civil society and human rights activists in criminal and state security courts and sentenced them to 2 to 10 years in prison for crimes against state security (see Section 1.e.). In December 2000, a local human rights organization published an open letter in a Lebanese newspaper calling for the closure of the notorious Tadmur Prison.

The Emergency Law and Penal Code articles dealing with crimes against state security allow the Government broad discretion in determining what constitutes illegal expression. The Emergency Law prohibits the publication of "false information", which opposes "the goals of the revolution" (see Section 1.e.). Penal Code articles prohibit "attempting to illegally change the Constitution," "preventing authorities from executing their responsibilities," and "acts or speech inciting confessionism." In August 2001, the Government amended the Press Law to permit the reestablishment of publications that were circulated prior to 1963 and established a framework in which the National Front Parties, as well as other approved private individuals and organizations, would be permitted to publish their own newspapers. However, the same amendments also stipulated imprisonment and stiff financial penalties as part of broad, vague provisions prohibiting the publication of "inaccurate" information, particularly if it "causes public unrest, disturbs international relations, violates the dignity of the state or national

unity, affects the morale of the armed forces, or inflicts harm on the national economy and the safety of the monetary system." Persons found guilty of publishing such information were subject to prison terms ranging from 1 to 3 years and fines ranging from \$10,000 to \$20,000 (500,000 to 1 million Syrian pounds). The amendments also imposed strict punishments on reporters who do not reveal their government sources in response to government requests. Critics claimed that the amendment would increase self-censorship by journalists, and that it strengthened, rather than relaxed, restrictions on the press.

The Government imprisoned journalists for failing to observe press restrictions. Official media reported that journalist Ibrahim Hamidi was arrested on December 23 on charges of "publishing unfounded news," a violation of Article 51 of the 2001 Publication Law. Although the announcement did not specify the violation, it was believed to be a December 20 article in the London-based al-Hayat discussing the Government's contingency planning for possible hostilities in Iraq. At year's end, Hamidi still was detained by authorities and denied contact with his family. State security services were known to threaten local journalists, including with the removal of credentials, for articles printed outside the country. In April and May the Government refused to renew the press credentials and/or residency permits of several journalists for reasons including "ill-intentioned reporting" and "violating the rules for accrediting correspondents and the tradition of the profession of journalism."

The Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance censored domestic and imported foreign press. They usually prevent the publication or distribution of any material deemed threatening or embarrassing by the security services to high levels of the Government. Censorship usually was stricter for materials in Arabic. Commonly censored subjects included: The Government's human rights record; Islamic fundamentalism; allegations of official involvement in drug trafficking; aspects of the Government's role in Lebanon; graphic descriptions of sexual activity; material unfavorable to the Arab cause in the Middle East conflict; and material that was offensive to any of the country's religious groups. In addition most journalists and writers practiced self-censorship to avoid provoking a negative government reaction.

There were several new private publications in 2000 and 2001, but only one appeared during this year. In January 2001, the Government permitted publication of the National Progressive Front's (NPF) Communist Party newspaper, The People's Voice. It became the first private paper distributed openly since 1963. In February 2001, the Government permitted publication of the NPF's Union Socialist Party's private newspaper, The Unionist. Also in February 2001, the Government permitted the publication of a private satirical weekly newspaper, The Lamplighter, which criticized politically nonsensitive instances of government waste and corruption. In June 2001, the Government permitted the publication of the private weekly newspaper The Economist, which was critical of the performance of the Government.

In his July 2000 inaugural speech, President Bashar Al-Asad emphasized the principle of media transparency. Since July 2000, both the print and electronic media at times have been critical of Ba'th Party and government performance and have reported openly on a range of social and economic issues. While this relaxation of censorship did not extend to domestic politics or foreign policy issues, it was a notable departure from past practice. Some Damascus-based correspondents for regional Arab media also were able to file reports on internal political issues, such as rumored governmental changes, new political discussion groups, and the possible introduction of new parties to the Ba'th Party-dominated National Progressive Front.

The media continued to broaden somewhat their reporting on regional developments, including the Middle East peace process. The media covered some peace process events factually, but other events were reported selectively to support official views. The government-controlled press increased its coverage of official corruption and governmental inefficiency. A few privately owned newspapers published during the year; foreign-owned, foreign-published newspapers continued to circulate relatively freely.

The Government or the Ba'th Party owned and operated the radio and television companies and most of the newspaper publishing houses. The Ministry of Information closely monitored radio and television news programs to ensure adherence to the government line. The Government did not interfere with broadcasts from abroad. Satellite dishes have proliferated throughout all regions and in neighborhoods of all social and economic categories, and in 2001 the Minister of Economy and Foreign Trade authorized private sector importers to import satellite receivers and visual intercommunication systems.

The Ministry of Culture and National Guidance censored fiction and nonfiction works, including films. It also approved which films may or may not be shown at the cultural centers operated by foreign embassies. The Government prohibited the publication of books and other materials in Kurdish; however, there were credible reports that Kurdish language materials were available in the country (see Section 5).

In 2000 cellular telephone service was introduced although its high cost severely limited the number of subscribers. Internet access and access to e-mail was limited but growing. The Government blocked access to selected Internet sites that contained information deemed politically sensitive or pornographic in nature. The Government also consistently blocked citizens' access to servers that provide free e-mail services. The Government has disrupted telephone services to the offices and residences of several foreign diplomats, allegedly because the lines were used to access Internet providers outside the country.

The Government restricted academic freedom. Public school teachers were not permitted to express ideas contrary to government policy, although authorities allowed somewhat greater freedom of expression at the university level.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of assembly does not exist under the law. Citizens may not hold demonstrations unless they obtain permission from the Ministry of Interior. Most public demonstrations were organized by the Government or the Ba'th Party. The Government

selectively permitted some demonstrations, usually for political reasons. The Government applied the restrictions on public assembly in Palestinian refugee camps, where controlled demonstrations have been allowed.

During the year there continued to be numerous demonstrations, most of which were permitted or organized by the Government, and some of which were directed against diplomatic missions and international agencies in reaction to the Israeli Government's use of force against Palestinians in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza.

In 2000 there were large demonstrations in Suwayda province following violent clashes between Bedouin shepherds and Druze residents of the province (see Sections 1.a. and 5).

The Government restricted freedom of association. During the year, it required private associations to register with authorities and denied several such requests, presumably on political grounds. The Government usually granted registration to groups not engaged in political or other activities deemed sensitive. The Government required political forums and discussion groups to obtain prior approval to hold lectures and seminars and to submit lists of all attendees. Despite these restrictions, during the year several domestic human rights and civil society groups held meetings without registering with the Government or obtaining prior approval for the meetings.

The authorities did not allow the establishment of independent political parties (see Section 3).

The Government sentenced 10 human rights activists who had called for the expansion of civil liberties and organized public dialogue to lengthy prison stays for committing crimes against state security (see Sections 1.d. and 2.a.).

In 1980 the Government dissolved, and then reconstituted under its control, the executive boards of professional associations after some members staged a national strike and advocated an end to the state of emergency. The associations have not been independent since that time and generally are led by members of the Ba'th Party, although nonparty members may serve on their executive boards. At year's end, there was no new information on whether any persons detained in 1980 crackdowns on union and professional association officials remained in detention (see Sections 1.d. and 6.a.).

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, it imposed restrictions in some areas. The Constitution requires that the President be a Muslim. There is no official state religion; Sunni Muslims constitute the majority of the population.

All religions and orders must register with the Government, which monitors fund raising and requires permits for all meetings by religious groups, except for worship. There is a strict separation of religious institutions and the state. Religious groups tended to avoid any involvement in internal political affairs. The Government in turn generally refrained from becoming involved in strictly religious issues.

The Government considers militant Islam a threat and follows closely the practice of its adherents. The Government has allowed many new mosques to be built; however, sermons are monitored and controlled, and mosques are closed between prayers.

In 1999 and 2000, there were large-scale arrests, and torture in some cases, of Syrian and Palestinian Islamists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Salvation Party (see Sections 1.c. and 1.d.).

Officially all schools are government run and nonsectarian, although some schools are run in practice by Christian, Druze, and Jewish minorities. There is mandatory religious instruction in schools, with government-approved teachers and curriculums. Religion courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim, Druze, and Christian students. Although Arabic is the official language in public schools, the Government permits the teaching of Armenian, Hebrew, Syriac (Aramaic), and Chaldean in some schools on the basis that these are "liturgical languages."

Religious groups are subject to their respective religious laws on marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance (see Section 5).

Government policy officially disavows sectarianism of any kind. However, in the case of Alawis, religious affiliation can facilitate access to influential and sensitive posts. For example, members of the President's Alawi sect hold a predominant position in the security services and military, well out of proportion to their percentage of the population, estimated at 12 percent (see Section 3).

For primarily political rather than religious reasons, the less than 100 Jews remaining in the country generally are barred from government employment and do not have military service obligations. Jews are the only religious minority group whose passports and identity cards note their religion.

There generally was little societal discrimination or violence against religious minorities, including Jews.

For a more detailed discussion see the 2002 International Religious Freedom Report.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The Government limited freedom of movement. The Government restricted travel near the Golan Heights. Travel to Israel was illegal. Exit visas generally no longer were required for women, men over 50 years old, and citizens living abroad. Individuals have been denied permission to travel abroad on political grounds, although government officials deny that this practice occurs. The authorities may prosecute any person found attempting to emigrate or to travel abroad illegally, or who has been deported from another country, or who is suspected of having visited Israel. Women over the age of 18 have the legal right to travel without the permission of male relatives. However, a husband or a father may file a request with the Ministry of Interior to prohibit his wife or daughter's departure from the country (see Section 5). Security checkpoints continued, although primarily in military and other restricted areas. There were few police checkpoints on main roads and in populated areas. Generally the security services set up checkpoints to search for smuggled goods, weapons, narcotics, and subversive literature. The searches took place without warrants.

The Government has refused to recognize the citizenship of or to grant identity documents to some persons of Kurdish descent. Their lack of citizenship or identity documents restricts them from traveling to and from the country (see Section 5). Emigres who did not complete mandatory military service may pay a fee to avoid being conscripted while visiting the country.

As of June, 401,185 Palestinian refugees were registered with the U.N. Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in the country. In general Palestinian refugees no longer report unusual difficulties travelling in and out of the country, as has been the case in the past. The Government restricted entry by Palestinians who were not resident in the country.

Citizens of Arab League countries may enter the country without a visa for a stay of up to 3 months, a period that is renewable on application to government authorities. Residency permits require proof of employment and a fixed address in the country.

The law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status in accordance with the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol. The Government cooperates on a case-by-case basis with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees. The Government provides first asylum but is selective about extending protection to refugees; 2,260 persons sought asylum during the year. Although the Government denied that it forcibly repatriated persons with a valid claim to refugee status, it apparently did so in the past. In September there were 3,018 non-Palestinian refugees in the country, all of whom were receiving assistance from the UNHCR, including 1,812 refugees of Iraqi origin.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

Although citizens vote for the President and Members of Parliament, they did not have the right to change their government. The late President Hafiz Al-Asad was confirmed by unopposed referenda five times after taking power in 1970. His son, Bashar Al-Asad, also was confirmed by an unopposed referendum in July 2000. The Government is headed by a Cabinet, which the President has the discretion to change. Political opposition to the President is vigorously suppressed. The President and his senior aides, particularly those in the military and security services, ultimately make most basic decisions in political and economic life, with a very limited degree of public accountability. Moreover the Constitution mandates that the Ba'th Party is the ruling party and is ensured a majority in all government and popular associations, such as workers' and women's groups. Six smaller political parties are permitted to exist and, along with the Ba'th Party, make up the National Progressive Front (NPF), a grouping of parties that represents the sole framework of legal political party participation for citizens. While created to give the appearance of a multiparty system, the NPF is dominated by the Ba'th Party and does not change the essentially one-party character of the political system. Non-Ba'th Party members of the NPF exist as political parties largely in name only and conform strictly to Ba'th Party and government policies. In 2000 there were reports that the Government was considering legislation to expand the NPF to include new parties and several parties previously banned; however, at year's end, there were no new developments.

The Ba'th Party dominates the Parliament, which is known as the People's Council. Although parliamentarians may criticize policies and modify draft laws, the executive branch retains ultimate control over the legislative process. The Government has allowed independent non-NPF candidates to run for a limited allotment of seats in the 250-member People's Council. The allotment of non-NPF deputies was 83, ensuring a permanent absolute majority for the Ba'th Party-dominated NPF. Elections for the 250 seats in the People's Council last took place in 1998.

In March and April, the Government sentenced independent Members of Parliament Ma'mun Humsi and Riad Seif to 5 year prison terms for attempting to illegally change the Constitution (see Section 1.d.).

Persons convicted by the State Security Court may be deprived of their political rights after they are released from prison. Such restrictions include a prohibition against engaging in political activity, the denial of passports, and a bar on accepting government jobs and some other forms of employment. The duration of such restrictions is 7 years after expiration of the sentence in the case of felony convictions; however, in practice the restrictions may continue beyond that period. The

Government contends that this practice is mandated by the Penal Code; it has been in effect since 1949.

Women and minorities, with the exception of the Jewish population and stateless Kurds (see Section 5), participated in the political system without restriction. There were 2 female cabinet ministers, and 26 of the 250 members of Parliament were women. No figures of the percentage of women and minorities who vote were available; however, citizens are required by law to vote.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

The Government did not allow domestic human rights groups to exist legally. Human rights groups have operated legally but ultimately were banned by the Government. The Government's sentencing of 10 civil society leaders this year to lengthy prison sentences stifled the activities of human rights activists and organizations (see Sections 1.d., 1.e., and 2.a.).

In February 2001, Human Rights Watch criticized the Government for restricting civil society groups from meeting. Human Rights Watch claimed that such groups had grown in popularity in the preceding months, but that on February 18, 2001 the Government informed many leaders of such groups that their meetings could not be held without government permission.

The Government has met only twice with international human rights organizations: Human Rights Watch in 1995 and Amnesty International in 1997.

As a matter of policy, the Government in its dealings with international groups denied that it commits human rights abuses. It has not permitted representatives of international organizations to visit prisons. The Government stated that it responds in writing to all inquiries from NGOs regarding human rights issues, including the cases of individual detainees and prisoners, through an interagency governmental committee established expressly for that purpose. The Government usually responds to queries from human rights organizations and foreign embassies regarding specific cases by claiming that the prisoner in question has violated national security laws.

Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Disability, Language, or Social Status

The Constitution provides for equal rights and equal opportunity for all citizens. However, in practice membership in the Ba'th Party or close familial relations with a prominent party member or powerful government official can be important for economic, social, or educational advancement. Party or government connections paved the way for entrance into better elementary and secondary schools, access to lucrative employment, and greater power within the Government, the military, and the security services. Certain prominent positions, such as that of provincial governor, were reserved solely for Ba'th Party members. Apart from some discrimination against Jews and stateless Kurds, there were no apparent patterns of systematic government discrimination based on race, sex, disability, language, or social status. However, there were varying degrees of societal discrimination in each of these areas.

Women

Violence against women occurred, but there were no reliable statistics regarding the prevalence of domestic violence or sexual assault. The vast majority of cases likely were unreported, and victims generally were reluctant to seek assistance outside the family. Battered women have the legal right to seek redress in court, but few do so because of the social stigma attached to such action. The Syrian Women's Federation offers services to battered wives to remedy individual family problems. The Syrian Family Planning Association also attempts to deal with this problem. Some private groups, including the Family Planning Association, have organized seminars on violence against women, which were reported by the government press. There are a few private, nonofficial, specifically designated shelters or safe havens for battered women who seek to flee their husbands.

Rape is a felony; however, there are no laws against spousal rape.

Prostitution is prohibited by law, and it was not a widespread problem.

The law specifically provides for reduced sentences in "honor" crimes (violent assaults with intent to kill against a female by a male for alleged sexual misconduct). Instances of honor crimes were rare and occurred primarily in rural areas in which Bedouin customs prevail.

The law prohibits sexual harassment and specifies different punishments depending on whether the victim is a minor or an adult. Sexual harassment was rarely reported.

The Constitution provides for equality between men and women and equal pay for equal work. Moreover the Government has sought to overcome traditional discriminatory attitudes toward women and encourages women's education. However, the Government has not yet changed personal status, retirement, and social security laws that discriminate against women. In addition, some secular laws discriminate against women. For example, under criminal law, the punishment for adultery for a woman is twice that as for the same crime committed by a man.

Christians, Muslims, and other religious groups are subject to their respective religious laws on marriage, divorce, and inheritance. For Muslims, personal status law on divorce is based on Shari'a (Islamic law), and some of its provisions discriminate against women. For example, husbands may claim adultery as grounds for divorce, but wives face more difficulty in presenting the same argument. If a woman requests a divorce from her husband, she may not be entitled to child support in some instances. In addition, under the law a woman loses the right to custody of boys when they reach age 9 and girls at age 12.

Inheritance for Muslims also is based on Shari'a. Accordingly Muslim women usually are granted half of the inheritance share of male heirs. However, Shari'a mandates that male heirs provide financial support to the female relatives who inherit less. If they do not, females have the right to sue.

Polygyny is legal but is practiced only by a small minority of Muslim men.

A husband may request that his wife's travel abroad be prohibited (see Section 2.d.). Women generally are barred from travelling abroad with their children unless they are able to prove that the father has granted permission for the children to travel.

Women participated actively in public life and were represented in most professions, including the military. Women were not impeded from owning or managing land or other real property. Women constituted approximately 7 percent of judges, 10 percent of lawyers, 57 percent of teachers below university level, and 20 percent of university professors.

Children

There was no legal discrimination between boys and girls in education or in health care. The Government provides free, public education from primary school through university. Education is compulsory for all children, male or female, between the ages of 6 and 12. According to the Syrian Women's Union, approximately 46 percent of the total number of students through the secondary level are female. Nevertheless, societal pressure for early marriage and childbearing interferes with girls' educational progress, particularly in rural areas, in which the dropout rates for female students remained high.

The Government provides medical care for children until the age of 18.

Although there are cases of child abuse, there is no societal pattern of abuse against children. The law provides for severe penalties for those found guilty of the most serious abuses against children.

Child prostitution and trafficking in children are rare; incidents that arise mainly involve destitute orphans.

The law emphasizes the need to protect children, and the Government has organized seminars regarding the subject of child welfare.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities and seeks to integrate them into the public sector work force. However, implementation is inconsistent. Regulations reserving four percent of government and public sector jobs for persons with disabilities are not implemented rigorously. Persons with disabilities may not legally challenge alleged instances of discrimination. There are no laws that mandate access to public buildings for persons with disabilities.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The Government generally permitted national and ethnic minorities to conduct traditional, religious, and cultural activities; however, the Government's attitude toward the Kurdish minority was a significant exception. Although the Government contends that there was no discrimination against the Kurdish population, it placed limits on the use and teaching of the Kurdish language. It also restricted the publication of books and other materials written in Kurdish (see Section 2.a.), Kurdish cultural expression, and, at times, the celebration of Kurdish festivals. The Government tacitly accepted the importation and distribution of Kurdish language materials, particularly in the northeast region where most of the Kurds in the country reside. Some members of the Kurdish community have been tried by the Supreme State Security Court for expressing support for greater Kurdish autonomy or independence. Although the Government stopped the practice of stripping Kurds of their Syrian nationality (some 120,000 had lost Syrian nationality under this program in the 1960s), it never restored the nationality to those who lost it earlier. As a result, those who had lost their nationality, and their children, have been unable to obtain passports, or even identification cards and birth certificates. Without Syrian nationality, these stateless Kurds, who according to UNHCR estimates number approximately 200,000, are unable to own land, are not permitted to practice as doctors or engineers or be employed by the Government, are ineligible for admission to public hospitals, have no right to vote, and cannot travel to and from the country. They also encounter difficulties in enrolling their children in school, and in some cases, in registering their marriages.

In November 2000, a number of armed clashes occurred between Bedouin shepherds and Druze residents of Suwayda Province that required government military intervention to stop. Local press reported that between 15 and 20 Druze, Bedouin,

and security forces personnel were killed. There were large demonstrations following the deaths (see Sections 1.a. and 2.b.).

In August President Asad became the first president in 40 years to visit Hasakeh province in the northeast, where most Kurds reside. In meetings with regional and Kurdish leaders, he reportedly acknowledged the importance of Kurds to the local cultural heritage and stated his willingness to discuss citizenship problems.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

Although the Constitution provides for this right, workers were not free to establish unions independent of the Government. All unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), which is dominated by the Ba'th Party and is in fact a part of the State's bureaucratic structure. The GFTU is an information channel between political decision-makers and workers. The GFTU transmits instructions downward to the unions and workers but also conveys information to decision-makers about worker conditions and needs. The GFTU advises the Government on legislation, organizes workers, and formulates rules for various member unions. The GFTU president is a senior member of the Ba'th Party. He and his deputy may attend cabinet meetings on economic affairs. The GFTU controls nearly all aspects of union activity.

There were no reports of antiunion discrimination. Since the unions are part of the Government's bureaucratic structure, they are protected by law from antiunion discrimination.

The GFTU is affiliated with the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions.

In 1992 the country's eligibility for tariff preferences under the U.S. Generalized System of Preferences was suspended because the Government failed to afford internationally recognized worker rights to workers.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The right to organize and bargain collectively does not exist in any meaningful sense. Government representatives were part of the bargaining process in the public sector. In the public sector, unions did not normally bargain collectively on wage issues, but there was some evidence that union representatives participated with representatives of employers and the supervising ministry in establishing minimum wages, hours, and conditions of employment. Workers serve on the boards of directors of public enterprises, and union representatives always are included on the boards.

The law provides for collective bargaining in the private sector, although past repression by the Government dissuaded most workers from exercising this right.

Unions have the right to litigate disputes over work contracts and other workers' interests with employers and may ask for binding arbitration. In practice labor and management representatives settle most disputes without resort to legal remedies or arbitration. Management has the right to request arbitration, but that right seldom is exercised. Arbitration usually occurs when a worker initiates a dispute over wages or severance pay.

The law does not prohibit strikes; however, previous government crackdowns deterred workers from striking. In 1980 the security forces arrested many union and professional association officials who planned a national strike. Some of them are believed to remain in detention, either without trial or after being tried by the State Security Court (see Sections 1.d. and 2.b.). During the year, there were no strikes.

There are no unions in the seven free trade zones. Firms in the zones are exempt from the laws and regulations governing hiring and firing, although they must observe some provisions on health, safety, hours, and sick and annual leave.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Bonded Labor

There is no law prohibiting forced or bonded labor, including that performed by children. There were no reports of forced or bonded labor by children, or forced labor involving foreign workers or domestic servants. Forced labor has been imposed as a punishment for some convicted prisoners.

d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for Employment

The Labor Law provides for the protection of children from exploitation in the workplace; however, the Government tolerated child labor in some instances. Independent information and audits regarding government enforcement were not available. The compulsory age for schooling is 6 to 12 years of age; however, in 2000 the Parliament approved legislation that raised the private sector minimum age for employment from 12 to 15 years for most types of nonagricultural labor, and from 16 to 18 years for heavy work. Working hours for youths of legal age do not differ from those established for adults. In all cases, parental permission is required for children under the age of 16. The law prohibits children from working at night. However, the law

applies only to children who work for a salary. Those who work in family businesses and who technically are not paid a salary—a common phenomenon—do not fall under the law. Children under the age of 16 are prohibited by law from working in mines, at petroleum sites, or in other dangerous fields. Children are not allowed to lift, carry, or drag heavy objects. The exploitation of children for begging purposes also is prohibited. The Government claims that the expansion of the private sector has led to more young children working.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs monitored employment conditions for persons under the age of 18, but it does not have enough inspectors to ensure compliance with the laws. The Ministry has the authority to specify the industries in which children 15 and 16 years of age may work.

The Labor Inspection Department performed unannounced spot checks of employers on a daily basis to enforce the law; however, the scope of these checks was unknown. The majority of children under age 16 who work did so for their parents in the agricultural sector without remuneration. The ILO reported in 1998 that 10.5 percent of children under the age of 18 participate in the labor force, which amounts to 4.7 percent of the total work force.

The law does not prohibit forced or bonded labor by children; however, such practices were not known to occur.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The Minister of Labor and Social Affairs is responsible for enforcing minimum wage levels in the public and private sectors. In May the Government increased public sector minimum wages by 20 percent to \$69 (3,175 Syrian pounds) per month, plus other compensation (for example, meals, uniforms, and transportation). In August the Government announced a 20 percent increase in private sector minimum wages. The gain in minimum wage levels was largely cancelled out by the increase in prices. These wages did not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. As a result, many workers in both the public and private sectors take additional jobs or are supported by their extended families.

The statutory workweek for administrative staff is 6 days of 6 hours each, and laborers work 6 days a week of 8 hours each. In some cases a 9-hour workday is permitted. The laws mandate one 24-hour rest day per week. Rules and regulations severely limit the ability of an employer to dismiss employees without cause. Even if a person is absent from work without notice for a long period, the employer must follow a lengthy procedure of trying to find the person and notify him, including through newspaper notices, before he is able to take any action against the employee. Dismissed employees have the right of appeal to a committee of representatives from the union, management, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, and the appropriate municipality. Such committees usually find in favor of the employee. Dismissed employees are entitled to 80 percent of salary benefits while the dispute is under consideration. No additional back wages are awarded should the employer be found at fault, nor are wage penalties imposed in cases in which the employer is not found at fault. The law does not protect temporary workers who are not subject to regulations on minimum wages. Small private firms and businesses employ such workers to avoid the costs associated with hiring permanent employees.

The law mandates safety in all sectors, and managers are expected to implement them fully. In practice there is little enforcement without worker complaints, which occur infrequently despite government efforts to post notices regarding safety rights and regulations. Large companies, such as oil field contractors, employ safety engineers.

The ILO noted in 1998 that a provision in the Labor Code allowing employers to keep workers at the workplace for as many as 11 hours a day might lead to abuse. However, there have been no reports of such abuses. Officials from the Ministries of Health and Labor are designated to inspect work sites for compliance with health and safety standards; however, such inspections appear to be sporadic, apart from those conducted in hotels and other facilities that cater to foreigners. The enforcement of labor laws in rural areas also is more lax than in urban areas, where inspectors are concentrated. Workers may lodge complaints about health and safety conditions, with special committees established to adjudicate such cases. Workers have the right to remove themselves from hazardous conditions without risking loss of employment.

The law provides protection for foreign workers who reside legally in the country; but not for illegal workers. There were no credible estimates available on the number of illegal workers in the country.

f. Trafficking in Persons

There are no laws that specifically prohibit trafficking in persons; however, there were no reports that persons were systematically being trafficked to, from, or within the country. Standard labor laws could be applied in the event of allegations of trafficking. The Penal Code penalizes prostitution and trafficking of citizen women abroad.